WISE MEN STILL FOLLOW A STAR
Matthew 2:1-11
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Unlike Easter Sunday, the preacher's task on Christmas Day feels a little ambiguous. The event commemorated on December 25 has been thoroughly celebrated in the anticipating. One of the psychological realities with which all of us must come to terms is the letdown of Christmas Day. We began so long ago, it seems. We lighted our Advent wreaths, and decorated our special spaces, and listened to the magnificent cadences of George Frederick Handel, and secreted gifts to their appointed hiding places, and sang the carols. A good measure of the joy is the anticipating. And some time in the middle of Christmas morning each of us feels a tinge of regret that it is escaping so quickly. We want to slow it down, and savor and embrace the precious minutes.

By eleven o'clock we are already on the down side of the feast. You may be interested in the fact that your staff discussed the schedule for this morning very seriously. We were interested to learn that a sister Church in Pittsburgh cancelled all ordinary Sunday activities in favor of one worship service at 12:15, in order to give its families more time to enjoy the morning. But after discussing the matter we concluded that whatever happens in our homes on Christmas morning happens well before eleven o'clock: that for some , at least, the festivities crest somewhere around 7:30.

In any event, as I thought about the task of preaching at eleven on Christmas Morning: as I tried to anticipate the mood of the hardy souls who might be here, it occurred to me that the story of the Wise Men provides an appropriate metaphor. They traveled a long way to get where they were going. When they arrived what they encountered, I have always imagined, was not at all what they expected. And I propose to make their familiar story the framework for our thinking together this morning.

Thomas Hardy wrote a poem one time under the title, God's Funeral. In the poem a spectator is watching a grim funeral procession. The dead form of God is being carried and Hardy describes the mourners as "lined on the brows, scoop-eyed and bent..." A certain few, however, stand off from this mournful scenario and the poet hears them say...

> "See you upon the horizon that small light -
> Swelling somewhat?"

That rather dramatic image evokes for me the experience of these strange characters known as Wise Men. We know very little about them actually. Magi comes from the Greek word Magus, Babylonian astrologers who were students of the stars, observing, calculating and predicting future events on the basis of what they saw. They saw something that no one else did. And incredibly they saddled up their camels and rode off through the desert to find it. Again, we know nothing about their journey. We don't know how many times they considered turning back, how they must have argued about it, how one of them perhaps kept complaining about what the other two had gotten him into. For the record we don't even know how many there were. The noun is plural in the text: they brought three gifts: and so tradition has made them three in number. But more to the point, for our purposes this morning, is the assertion that whoever they were, and however many they were, they saw a star and followed it to the place it led.

What a comedown it must have been when they arrived at that dark, dirty stable in the obscure village of Bethlehem. They fell down and worshiped the child, St. Matthew reports. They presented their elegant gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to the baby. But I wonder what they were thinking about when their expectation of a royal child confronted the manger, feeding box for the livestock, and the unmarried adolescent mother, and the nondescript carpenter father. And as if that weren't enough they had to find another way home and sneak out of town at night in order to avoid an ominous entanglement with a petty tyrant by the name of Herod.

What a comedown. The first dimension of this remarkable story that I want to hold up this morning, however, is that these men, whoever they were, out of the ordinariness of the everyday world, saw the star, a vision if you will, a compelling dream, and were just foolhardy and courageous enough to follow it.

Tennyson picked up on that idea in these lines:

> "He wakes desires you never may forget:
> He shows you stars you never saw before:
> He makes you share with him forevermore
> The burden of the world's divine regret."
> (Leonard W. Mann, Stars You Never Saw Before, p.5)

So Christmas, it seems to me, shows us "stars we never saw before" - and calls us to follow: a vision of a new humanity suddenly graced with the stamp of God's love: a new world where peace is practiced and not just discussed: a better place where kindness and generosity and forgiveness actually replace arrogance and selfishness and hurtfulness: a new vision of our own humanity, if you will, now ennobled by the birth of God's Son as one of us; a future open with possibility in which no dream is too ambitious to dream, no star too bright to follow.

The antithesis is to live without a vision: to be so immersed in the ordinary that no grand cause ever tugs at the heart, no passionate love ever causes tears to flow. The dead weight of daily life can do that to us. Leonard Mann writes about a woman: "Fourscore years this life she led: in the morning she arose, and at night went to bed."

The trouble with visions, and following stars is that we are likely to be surprised at the results. The trouble with idealists, someone has observed, is that they don't often like the places their ideals take them or the things their ideals ask them to do. Every one of us knows exactly what that means: we know how the Magi felt when the star led them out into a dry desert and a long journey pointing toward a destination they would not have chosen.

...Young people make brave plans for a significant, exciting career, and discover that what they are really looking at is eight long years of hard work.

...No young man and young woman ever sat in my study to talk about a wedding who did not believe, and know, that their relationship was the most perfect, the strongest, the most lasting. And for some it comes as somewhat of a surprise to discover shortly thereafter that what they are looking at is hard work, and some frustrations, and a little conflict, and persistent challenges to one's ego and the necessity of disciplined love.

...Young ministers, particularly, erupt from Seminary with a vision of the church as the servant of the world, God's chosen people, haven for the homeless, reconciler of the lost, advocate of the oppressed; only to discover that what they're looking at is the unromantic task of talking the trustees into [illegible] enough money to fix the boiler, and mediating the conflict between Mrs. Smith and Mrs. Jones about altar flowers.

In all of life, the inertia of the ordinary weighs against any star we contemplate following. The Magi, no doubt, were sorely tempted to stay at home. But the visionaries - the Christmas people - the truly wise men and women - will always be found following stars.

Alistair Cooke has written a very interesting book about six remarkable men of our age - one of whom is Bertrand Russell. He recalls Lord Russell's credo - actually borrowed from George Bernard Shaw:

> "This is the true joy in life, the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one: the being thoroughly worn out before you are thrown on the scrap heap: the being a force of nature instead of a feverish selfish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy." (Six Men, p.172)

That's first. Wise Men follow their star. The second dimension of the story which is of interest this morning is that somehow they had the capacity, in the first place, to see the star. There was something of the Child in the Wise Men. Against every dictate of adult common sense they insisted that there was more going on up there than what was meeting the eye. They were open to awe, wonder: instead of calculating they worshiped: instead of organizing a discussion group to investigate the astrological ramifications of the new star - they saw in it God's mysterious hand.

That is becoming a persistent motif in any analysis of the contemporary mind. We are obsessed with the laboratory. We - not the scientists, but the laymen - have convinced ourselves that whatever reality there is can be weighed, measured and reduced to an equation by a technician in a white coat.

Religion has taken its lumps in this context. We have thought as rationally about our faith as it is possible to think. We have studied and researched and investigated: even the Nativity has come under the careful scrutiny of scholarly research. For many, the logical result is a religion now cleansed of everything irrational which often means all the wonder and mystery and awe are gone.

Andrew Greeley wrote a fascinating article on the Entertainment Page of the Sunday Times several weeks ago entitled "When Religion Cast Off Wonder, Hollywood Seized It." (New York Times, 11-27-77)

With no little sarcasm Greeley wrote: "Consider the embarassment of the churches. They have demythologized the Christmas story and abandoned angels. Now Columbia pictures arrives on the scene at the holiday season with a full-compliment of angel-like creatures complete with blinding lights and celestial melody... (Close Encounters).

"...You can demythologize wonder out of your sacred books but you can't demythologize the hunger for the wonderful out of the human personality, or at least those who have tried it have not succeeded."

There is, I would submit, great wisdom in the silent contemplation of the Christmas story: the intentional laying aside of our critical faculties and the total immersion in this drama which is as old and as wise as the ages. There is wisdom in the soaring beauty of "Hallelujah - the Lord God omnipotent reigneth": there is wisdom in the reds and greens and the light of small candles. There is deep wisdom and fundamental reality in the sense that we are loved with an everlasting love.

My proposition this morning is quite simple. It is in two parts -

Christmas beckons us to a pilgrimage, following a vision.

Christmas points to a new light in the heavens.

It may be summarized in one sentence. "Wise Men and Women still follow a star."

Amen.

Father, for this glad morning we give thanks. For all that is good and human and kind about this day, we praise You. Help us to see the star and give us, through the year, faith to follow where it leads. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.